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Chapter 6

Ethnic Militias and National Security

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Introduction

ETHNIC violence has reached unprecedented proportions in contemporary discourse on Nigeria's democracy. Beginning from May 1999 when the country recommenced democratic rule, there has been a rapid emergence and proliferation of ethnic militias whose goal is to protect the identities and interests of the groups they represent within the federation. These include the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), the Igbo People's Congress (IPC), The Arewa People's Congress (APC), the Egbesu Society of the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Ijaw National Congress and the Urhobo National Union (Akinyele, 2001:623).

The dissatisfaction with the structure, operations and power configuration under Nigeria's federalism has been adduced for the unprecedented rise of militant ethnic groups, although some have argued that the increase in crime rate and the helpless attitude of law-enforcement agencies towards this have conferred legitimacy on such groups.

The activities of these ethnic militias pose a serious threat to

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national security and democratic stability. According to Thovoethin (2005), activities of these groups have exceeded the limits imposed by societal consensus. These, however, have a direct correlation with Nigeria's tradition of political brinkmanship, involving threats and counter-threats of breakdown of rule-induced and system-supportive behaviour (Agbaje, 2002).

The thrust of this paper is to examine the activities of ethnic militias and the threat they pose to national security. To achieve these objectives, the paper is divided into the following sections: Introduction, conceptual framework, the emergence of ethnic militias, the activities of ethnic militias and national security as well as recommendations and conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

The two major concepts made use of in this paper are 'Ethnic militias' and 'National security'. Before we attempt an in-depth analysis of the activities of ethnic militias, it is incumbent upon us to conceptualize the two key words.

Ethnic Militia: Ethnic militia is the extreme form of ethnic agitation for self-determination, as various groups assume militant posture and gradually metamorphose into militia groups, each of which bear an ethnic identity and purpose to act as the machinery through which the desires of its people are sought to be realized. The common features of these ethnically inspired movements are the resort to violence, preponderance in youth membership, ethnic identity affiliations, and the fact that they are mainly popular movements demanding change in the status quo (Agbu, 2002).

One would agree that the activities of the militia groups pose a great challenge to the stability of the country as a political entity. The violent nature of these militia movements has been responsible for the wanton destruction of lives and property, inter-ethnic

clashes and hostility where innocent people suffer (Badmus, 2003). These acts, which had not only created more terrifying problems, have in several realms armed youths to see their ethnic nationality as supreme amongst others, and also tend to endanger the national polity with the advent of ethnic militias as a force backing their individual ethnic interests.

There is no agreement among scholars as to the meaning of national security. Louwi (1978) argues that national security includes traditional defence policy and also the non-military actions of a state to ensure its total capacity to survive as a political entity in order to exert influence and to carry out its internal and international objectives. Bellany (1981:102) asserts that security itself is a relative freedom from war, coupled with a relatively high expectation that defeat will not be a consequence of any war that should occur. In analyzing the same concept, Trager and Kronenberg (1973:36), define national security as that part of government policy having as its objective the creation of national and international political conditions favourable to the protection or extension of vital national values against existing and potential adversaries. Mroz (1980:105) simply summarizes his definition by saying security is the relative freedom from harmful threats.

For any meaningful and workable understanding of national security, however, we are inclined to agree that national security is the probability of survival of the nation-state. When referring to a nation-state, security means the likelihood of survival; it means confidence in the maintenance of the state's boundaries; the well-being of the state and its ability to preserve its territorial, cultural or ideological integrity. It is logical to deduce from the foregoing that ethnic militias pose threats to national security.

The Emergence of Ethnic Militias

Ethnic militias of all descriptions erupted on the Nigerian political

scene during the military regimes of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. These regimes occasioned monsters that masqueraded in different reformist guises. Militia groups were therefore formed in response to this unusual development. Some of them, however, posed as pro-democracy groups. OPC was one of such groups (Obi, 2002). This group was able to fight for democracy, especially as it affects the Yoruba race. Thus, the self-determination of the OPC opened the way for other militia groups that had hitherto been in deep slumber (Thovoethin, 2005). For example, the emergence of Egbesu Boys and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), was encouraged by this development.

It is noteworthy of note that ethnic militias and their activities are more pronounced under the present democratic rule than its predecessor regimes, especially the military. This might not be unconnected with the relative liberal environment created by democracy and its degree of tolerance (Thovoethin, 2005). Democracy entails hearing different shades of views and making the best out of those views. But due to lack of proper orientation, this liberalized democratic posture encourages the proliferation of ethnic militias whose goal is to protect the identities and interests of the groups they represent within the federation. And in protecting the identities and interests of their ethnic groups, ethnic militias have engaged in varying degrees of violent activity. The next section of this paper will make an assessment of such activities from the re-commencement of democratic rule in 1999 up to 2004.

The Activities of Ethnic Militias and National Security

Ethnic militia groups have become a major part of Nigeria's present political landscape, often inflicting or threatening to inflict violence for political and economic advantage. The activities of ethnic militias are not new to Nigeria. However, the ferocity with which these violent attacks have occurred since the enthronement

of the present democratic rule has made them one of the challenging daring monsters that need to be tamed.

The reasons for ethnic militancy are diverse and they include those generated by continuous conflict and contradiction between citizen's and indigene's rights, ethnic and communal intolerance, environmental degradation, historical animosities, political competition, hunger and tension arising from the dynamics of everyday life between indigenes and settlers or strangers (Thovoethin, 2005). The nature and outcome of the various ethnic militant attacks from 1999 to 2004 are presented below:

- ◆ On 31 May, 1999, Ijaw and Itsekiri militamen engaged in a violent clash in Warri town, Delta State. The violent conflict erupted over the Olu of Warri's throne and recognition.
- ◆ In October 1999, the OPC attacked Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo indigenes (Egbesu) in Ajegunle, Lagos, over disagreement between a resident and the vigilante (OPC).
- ◆ On 8 November, 1999, the Egbesu group killed a policeman in Odi. The remote cause of the incident was the kidnapping and killing of policemen by Egbesu youths in retaliation for the killing of their members. The government later deployed soldiers, who killed and razed down the town of Odi in Bayelsa State.
- ◆ On 20 January, 2000, Mr. Afolabi Amoo, the DPO of Bariga Police Station was killed by OPC militants in Lagos.
- ◆ On 14 April, 2000, Agyragu crisis in Nassarawa State led to the killing of their fellow indigenes. The violence erupted when the militant youths of the town of Agyragu protested the location of the local government headquarters against the choice of their town.
- ◆ On 16 May, 2000, a bloody ethnic feud between Akasa and Igwama communities in Bayelsa State claimed many lives on

both sides. Ethnic crises championed by militant youths, which resulted in killing on both sides, sparked off the ethnic feud.

- ◆ On 5 June, 2000, the violent clash among the two militant groups linked to the contenders to the throne of Olowo of Owo in Ondo State led to the killing of people and the colossal destruction of property.
- ◆ On 17 October, 2002, an OPC-led attack in a bid to change the emirate system in Ilorin led to the death of many people. The attack was on both the Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba ethnic nationalities.
- ◆ In May 2001, the Tiv-Jukun and Fulani militias engaged in a feud over a disputed land and property in Jukun land in Taraba State.
- ◆ On 28 June, 2001, many lives were lost in Azara town, Nassarawa State when the Azara people revenged the killing of their traditional leader by the Tivs.
- ◆ On 7 October, 2001, several lives were lost and property destroyed in Okrika town, Rivers State in the struggle for clan chieftaincy.
- ◆ On 29 October, 2001, nineteen soldiers were killed by the Tiv militias in Tiv/ Jukun, in Taraba and Benue States in an escalation of the ethnic feud between the Tiv-Jukun and Fulani.
- ◆ On 18 January, 2002, some people were killed and many injured in the Awe crisis in Nassarawa State. The old feud among the communities in the local government re-echoed as militant youths raided and killed people indiscriminately.
- ◆ On 12 February, 2002, the OPC sacked the Hausa residents in Idi-Araba, Lagos. Misunderstanding between a Hausa resident and the Yoruba degenerated into an OPC violent attack on non-indigenes.
- ◆ On 25 March, 2002, more than 12 people were killed in a revenge attack on the Nselle people by the Ofara militants in Ikom, Cross River State.

- ◆ On 12 June, 2002, about 15 people were killed and many injured when ethnic youth militias of Ozoro and Okpaile communities clashed in Isiko, Delta State.
- ◆ On 25 April, 2003, the attack on the Navy and the Army by Ijaw militiamen left ten dead in Warri, Delta State. The Ijaw militia also intercepted the radio communication of the Navy and Army.
- ◆ On 30 April, 2003, women were killed in a crossfire between the Ijaw militia and Nigerian security agents. The security agents intervened when the Ijaw militia opened fire on an Itsekiri town, killing five women.
- ◆ On 1 May, 2003, Ijaw militias attacked government forces and oil installations in Opumani Tanke farm, Okerenkoko, Delta State.
- ◆ On 2 May, 2003, Ijaw militiamen attacked government forces and oil installations in Effurun, Ubeji, Delta State.
- ◆ On 22 February, 2004, Hausa/ Fulani militiamen launched an attack on a church, in Yelwa, Shendaam L.G.A of Plateau State, killing 48 persons.
- ◆ On 2-4 May, 2004, Gamai and Torak militiamen launched a reprisal attack in Yelwa, Plateau State, killing about 600 people and destroying 49 vehicles, 210 houses.

Sources: Asamu, 2005; Ayinla, 2004; Okechukwu, 2003.

From the above highlighted cases of ethnic militia attacks in the country, the nation since 1999 seems to have witnessed more violent ethnic conflicts, with devastating effects on national stability. The various incidences of ethnic militant attacks in the Fourth Republic pose serious threats to the nation's security and democratic governance, the consequences of which cut across various levels.

It is obvious that the armed confrontation between the various ethnic militias in the country poses a serious threat to security of lives and property in Nigeria. The activities of the ethnic militias have led to considerable violent killings and wanton destruction of property. In 1999 alone, there were over 2,001 violent clashes between groups and between communities. (Adegbamigbe, 2000). Most of these violent conflicts had links with the activities of ethnic militias.

Since the enthronement of democracy in 1999, there have been incidents of ethnic violence usually through and by ethnic militias in Ibadan (June 1999, January 2000), Sagamu (July 1999), Kano (July 1999), Lagos (October-November 1999), Ilaje, Ondo State (1999), Kaikama and Odi in Bayelsa State (1999-2000) (Ikelegbe, 2001).

There is huge fear even by the Federal Government that activities of ethnic militias are dangerous, divisive, criminal and are creating a situation of disorder, anarchy and disintegration. The government also believes that these militias are capable of further instigating violent conflicts of internal mega-proportions. The ethnic clashes which the OPC, IYC, APC, Niger Delta Vigilance (NDV) and Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) have generated, pose a major threat to the nation's nascent democracy, the corporate existence of the country, foreign investment and economic recovery.

Another dimension of the problem that should be a source of national security concern is the source of acquisition of weapons by the ethnic militias. There is ample evidence to show that some of the weapons used by these militiamen come from the government armoury. Other weapons seem to have found their ways into the country through her porous borders (Akinyele, 2001). In the case of the OPC, most of the weapons are locally made. They include the dreaded Oodua magical stick, axes and cutlasses of various shapes, and some guns (Akinyele, 2002). If the Federal Government

does not act promptly to block the sources of weapons in the hands of ethnic militias, the quantity of weapons (especially guns) in circulation may encourage ethnic militancy on a much larger scale, with the devastating consequences for national stability.

Apart from the alarming and astounding increase in both number and magnitude of loss, destruction and wanton human carnage, ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, championed by militias and private armies since the dawn of our nascent democracy, have become fused into the political agitation strategies of groups. While conflicts and crises may have become more rapid and heightened, the nature has undergone considerable change. The change has been in the fact that ethnic violence initiated by ethnic militias, even while bloody, are now channelled towards garnering more political benefits and economic gains for the groups concerned within the context of the new democratic dispensation.

The country is lucky that the different ethnic agendas have so far kept ethnic militias wide apart. Another point is that the threat to national security would be heightened if some of the ethnic militias were to unite for a common purpose. Normally, the alliance of any of the ethnic militias with a political party could pose a serious danger to the stability of the country during elections and in the process of taking decisions that affect the vital interests of the various groups (Akinyele, 2001). Indeed, contemporary activities of the ethnic militias in Nigeria can only be meaningfully understood within the context of the linkage to ethnic politics.

Recommendations

Deriving from the dynamics of ethnic militias and their implications for national security under this democratic dispensation, some recommendations can be made on how to reduce the menace of ethnic militias. These recommendations are:

First and foremost, political institutions for sustainable democracy must be established and constantly maintained. The electoral system comes clearly to mind. Given free and fair elections, ethnic militias may not feel shut out of the political process. They may be encouraged to pursue their objectives through the political process. But where the state is seen to be manipulative of the electoral process, the only option open to the oppressed poor may be ethnic militancy.

Second, there is need for the emergence of a class of visionary leaders that will be able to situate the Nigerian citizen at the centre stage of socio-economic and political projects. Anyway, one cannot see Nigeria engaging in a pragmatic democracy until the component units conscientiously agree to live together in a federation where the relationship among the tiers of government is built on fair allocation of resources.

Third, remarkable efforts should be made by the Nigerian authorities to see that there are physical developments of the specific areas such as the volatile Niger Delta region. This calls for the introduction of a reconciliatory agenda aimed at redressing the historical structural neglect, especially in the Niger Delta area, with a view to restructuring their environment to enable the indigenes enjoy a productive economic system.

In addition, the negative mobilization of ethnic identity can be brought to a tolerable level where state resources are fairly distributed among the diverse ethnic groups that inhabit a given locality.

As a way of checking ethnic militias and improving national security, government at all levels in Nigeria must intensify their poverty alleviation programmes while the youths who often constitute the bulk of ethnic militias should be reorientated and empowered economically.

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